

Ela Bhatt speech to the Parliament of Religions in Vadodora, August 2015 -- Role of religious harmony in women's dignity and empowerment

Your Excellency Former President of India Dr A P J Abdul Kalam and Dr Karan Singh,

Thank you for inviting me here to Vadodara at this Parliament of Religions and Ramakrishna Mission event. I am honoured to be involved in the Parliament's Women's Task Force to support women's leadership and ensure women's voices are heard when it comes to global debates on dignity, human rights, religion and spirituality.

I would like to talk about the role religion can play in empowering women and raising their dignity. Religion has a special role as it has the power to guide us, give us hope and make us feel strong. It gives us a sense of identity, not least in India where our diverse religious traditions form the backbone of our shared culture.

We are home to all major religions, who all share a collective history on the same land. We are proud of our multicultural society and *Bahudha* is at the centre of what makes us who we are; social diversity, political diversity, religious diversity, biological diversity and economic diversity. This does not mean we have been without religious tensions of course, but it could and should offer a clue for fostering a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect.

Divisions in our world are deep and myriad. Today, we see over 800 million people in the world living in extreme poverty. That is over 800 million people who exist outside of mainstream society and it is known that women are more likely to suffer poverty than men. At its best, the moral power within religion and the importance of its institutions throughout our society means it can play a leading role in alleviating poverty and including the marginalised.

My own organisation, Self Employed Women's Association, consists of approximately one third Muslim members and one third Dalit, and most of the rest are other under-privileged groups. Because we serve minorities we are thus very well aware of how social and religious tensions affect the poorest communities and people. When there are riots among the dalits, they affect our members. We work on rehabilitation, and on education. We represent the minorities against attacks that come from many directions, but especially the higher caste Hindus. But the tensions in many respects have made our organization stronger. There is more mutual helping, and greater assimilation among our members as a result.

My own background is a Hindu one, and my activism is very much framed within that context, of karma as meaning action. I am not the type who is particularly focused on the

theology and stories, or thinking too much about things. If I see a problem, something has to be done about it. I am an organizer, ready to go in the street, and that has been as long as I remember. I believe that those who are weak have to get together, and find ways to influence decision makers and places of power.

But that something has to be organized around solid values. Without that foundation, it is no use; there is no happiness. And in this, Gandhiji shows the way. What he has to say is so basic, so simple. People who hear it can say that they already know it, that it makes sense. You can generalize from that. There is nothing new; it is automatically, easily understood by me and you, poor, rich, rural, urban. The values are the very human values he talks about.

In today's world, these human values can get lost as religion blurs and mutates into a strange form of nationalism. But this is not nationalism as a form of pride of one's country, but a tool to spread sectarian hate and divide society. This is clear in conflicts both here in Asia and across the globe. In these conflicts we have seen women intentionally targeted and poverty being spread. Poverty is not a God-given state of affairs; it is most definitely man-made. No one is born poor; society makes one poor. Religion is being confused with traditions, which serve to bind societies together. Traditions are man-made. If we learn they are harmful, we should change them.

If we take a look at the fundamentals of religion, it is not a tool to oppress. Extremist groups are using mutant ideologies to gather the support of those on the edge of society. This is far from what religion was intended to do. Religion should bring positivity and hope into the lives of the most marginalised by making them visible, not spread fear and tyranny. To quote Nelson Mandela, a guiding moral light and founder of The Elders, the group of independent global leaders working together for human rights of which I'm proud to be a member:

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

The shared community of religion can allow women to come together and act as one. In this regard it is similar, in my experience, to trade unions. My union SEWA was set up in 1971. Now it stands as a women's only trade union with over 1.7 million members. These are women from different parts of India, different backgrounds and different trades. Our goal was to make these women come together and help themselves.

A fundamental role of religion is that it brings people together in a way many other organisations cannot. SEWA is a trade union where women came together, but religion is the largest example of what people can achieve when they come together – and this is why it is so important that religions should treat all their followers with equal respect.

My generation has been greatly influenced by Ghandiji and we all had one purpose, to rebuild after Indian independence. Ghandi's ultimate goal was not solely political independence, it was to win Swaraj. Swaraj is the pursuit of self-reliance and freedom. But Ghandiji also said Swaraj, or freedom, cannot be given; it is generated within one's self. Empowerment is not a thing that can be given or taken back. Let women be engaged to do things and to solve a problem, to deal with the issue and to mobilise. So that when they do things they are empowered, and when they do things collectively then they are empowered.

The importance of peace and empowerment alike, is that it is not out there, it is within us. Any positive, constructive act of love and care builds peace. And when millions take these actions, peace spreads. prosperity follows. Now this is not new. This is as old as Ghandiji, or Christ, or Buddha. This is in our heart. A human begins her or his life seeking love, truth, trust, a kind touch which is natural.

The Bhagwad Gita states that liberation is achieved through karma. Karma means action; karma means work. Work is central to human life, and as fundamental as truth and love. By work, I do not mean sweatshops and cheap labour, which are forms of exploitation. Work to me is better understood as livelihood. Livelihood evokes the language of a biomass and informal economy, people's economy. In this context, a woman is a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, and a networker. She is a forger of bonds—she is a creator and a preserver.

I consider women's participation and representation an integral part of the development process. Women will bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the world. I have great faith in the feminine and feminist way of transformation of the world.

This process of empowerment is, in my view, closely intertwined with the journey of personal development within religious traditions. This is why it is so important that women can contribute to religious life. Through all my work and experiences, I have come to believe that building an equitable, sustainable and peaceful world, lies in our sense of connectedness.

I am not alone in this world. You are bound to me and I am to you. I am also bound to the people in my community, and my community is bound to me. My community is linked to each neighbouring community, and together we form the world. Like oceanic circles, we are all interlinked. You, and I, our communities, faiths and traditions and the lands we share, are mutually related, making us all offspring of Mother Earth.